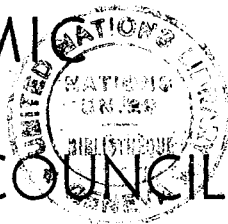


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REPORT ON THE WORLD CONFERENCE OF THE INTERNATIONAL  
WOMEN'S YEAR PRESENTED BY Mrs. RAJAN NEHRU AT THE  
1365TH MEETING OF THE COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS,  
ON 24 FEBRUARY 1976

I

The World Conference of the International Women's Year which met in Mexico City from 19 June to 2 July 1975 was the first international conference on women's rights and role in society to be convened by the United Nations. In order to make the Conference as representative as possible, invitations were issued, not only to Member States of the United Nations, but also to non-members and to some national liberation movements. Parallel activities, were also arranged, outside the official Conference, to enable non-governmental public organizations to make their own contribution to the discussions.

These varied activities attracted a vast gathering to Mexico City. There were over 1,000 official delegates, 80 per cent of them women, from 133 countries. Other participants were representatives of 10 inter-governmental and 113 non-governmental organizations, 23 United Nations organs and specialized agencies and 8 national liberation movements. The parallel activities included a seminar of experts on women's questions, a journalists' Encounter to explore the themes of the International Women's Year and a separate assembly, or Tribune, consisting of individuals of high standing and representatives of non-governmental organizations, which attracted nearly 6,000 delegates.

I had the privilege to represent the Human Rights Commission in the Conference. Much that was discussed and decided upon at this Conference has direct relevance for our deliberations in the Human Rights Commission and in that context in the wider sphere of preservation and furtherance of universal human rights.

What had aroused so much interest in the Conference was the United Nations' decision to launch a new programme (a World Plan of Action) for strengthening women's rights and the role of women in society. There were important reasons for launching such a programme. The United Nations is of course fully committed to equal rights

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1/ A written statement presented to the Conference by Mrs. Nehru on behalf of the Commission on Human Rights was issued as an official document of the Conference under the symbol E/CONF.66/16.

for men and women. This is one of the basic principles of the Charter and of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It has been spelt out and reinforced by numerous conventions, declarations, formal recommendations and other United Nations instruments. Many Member States have accepted these instruments and provided legal guarantees for the enforcement of equal rights.

The guarantees, however, have not proved fully effective. In many cases, they have been reduced to a dead letter by age-old traditions, customs, habits and economic and social systems which tend to confine women to domestic work and other family responsibilities, or to inferior forms of labour in the economy. Lack of education, training and other facilities is an additional obstacle to the assumption by women of higher or public responsibilities. Thus, old ways of life, based on inequality, which have existed for centuries in many societies, have remained generally unchanged, in spite of the legal guarantee of equal rights for men and women.

This gulf between law and reality has caused increasing concern to the United Nations. Progress in narrowing the gulf has been slow, while changing world conditions require, not only men, but also women to participate fully in national and international life. As women comprise half the population, their non-participation implies that a valuable asset is lost to the community. Many United Nations organs, in the past, have expressed concern over this situation. It was in the Tehran Conference on Human Rights, however, that constructive remedies were explored for the first time. The Conference meeting in 1968, discussed the role of women in the development field and the maintenance of peace and stability in the world. It came to the conclusion that the threat to world peace is increasing as a result of the growing disparity between the rich and poor nations. In order to avert the threat, it emphasized the need, apart from other measures, for the intensification of national and international development. What was needed, in its view, was the full participation of the entire population in the total development effort. As traditional attitudes towards women's role in society are coming in the way of women's full participation, the Conference called upon Member States not to rest content with the provision of legal guarantees of equal rights, but to prepare concrete plans of action for changing these attitudes and for equipping women by special measures for an active and constructive role in society.

Thus, in recent years, there has been a shift of emphasis from action confined to legal guarantees and declarations on women's rights to a more concrete action programme for the emancipation and advancement of women. The growing awareness of the imperative need of ensuring an active role for women, in their own interest and in the interest of the community as a whole, explains the decision of the United Nations General Assembly in 1972, on the recommendation of the Commission on the Status of Women, proclaiming 1975 as the International Women's Year. The Year was to be devoted to intensive action to promote genuine equality between men and women; to ensure the full integration of women in the total development effort; and to enable women to make an effective contribution to the maintenance of peace and stability in the world. In 1974, the Economic and Social Council, on the basis of the General Assembly's resolution, asked the Secretary-General of the United Nations to convene a world conference as the focal point of the Year's activities and to place before it an international action programme. It was in conformity with this decision that the International Women's Year Conference was held in Mexico City under the auspices of the United Nations.

## II

The Conference was inaugurated by the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Mr. Kurt Waldheim. Among the speakers who also addressed the Conference on the first day was President Eccheverria of Mexico who was a distinguished guest, the Secretary-General of the Conference, Mrs. Sipila, and the Attorney General of Mexico, Mr. Ojeda, who was elected President of the Conference.

Mr. Waldheim pointed out that new problems are arising in the world which have a direct bearing on the role of women in society. Problems relating to food, population, economic development, health, the environment and many other matters are of increasing complexity and are closely interlinked. They are component parts of a complex system which dominates the lives of all, irrespective of sex, creed, ideology or race. None can be resolved successfully, either by nations, or by part of a nation's population, acting independently. What is needed is a united effort by all nations in mutual co-operation and, within each nation, not only by man, but also by women whose potential has not yet been fully utilized, although they comprise half the population. The Conference, Mr. Waldheim said, is an historic event as it will help to change old attitudes, prejudices and assumptions concerning women and lead to greater progress and peace and stability in the world.

President Eccheverria made an important contribution which reflected the thinking of many delegations from the developing countries. Describing women as an enormous revolutionary reserve whose increasing awareness of unequal treatment make them natural allies in the struggle against oppression, he asked for radical social and economic changes in order to provide meaningful gains for all women as well as men. Calling for the realization of a new international economic order which would end the unfair economic relations resulting from colonialism and neo-colonialism, he stressed the need for linking efforts to improve the condition of women with actions directed against armaments, colonialism and neo-colonialism, foreign domination, interference in the domestic affairs of other nations and other political impediments.

Mrs. Sipila drew attention to the significant fact that the condition of women in society was being placed on the agenda of an international conference for the first time. This showed that the joint responsibility of both men and women to determine their common destiny is now increasingly recognized. It was high time, she said, for the world to acknowledge that the denial of women's rights is at the very root of problems of development and socio-economic ills. Mr. Ojeda, while repeating President Eccheverria's call for the establishment of a new international economic order, defined the main task of the Conference as the preparation, by careful negotiations, of an agreed programme of action which would ensure the integration of women in the total development effort and in the strengthening of peace and stability in the world.

The general debate that followed was very thought provoking and a number of very useful, constructive and progressive ideas were put forward both by representatives of developing as well as developed countries. The statements highlighted the measures already taken by many States before and during the International Women's Year

for enhancing the role of women in the society and helping them to assert their legitimate rights. The question of emancipation and advancement of women was commented upon in detail and the need to remove through progressive reforms the disabilities suffered by women was fully recognized. In the national statements as well as in the reports of the specialized agencies of the United Nations, there was a frank appraisal of the urgent need to overcome the backwardness and degradation which the women had suffered in many societies due to old ways of life based on inequality, injustice and conservatism.

### III

While general statements by heads of delegations were continued in the plenary session of the Conference, detailed work was entrusted to its two committees. The main task of the Conference was to prepare a World Plan of Action. This task was undertaken by its first committee. The committee dealt with such questions as the objectives of the International Women's Year; the involvement of women in strengthening peace and eliminating evils; obstacles to be overcome in achieving equal rights; current changes in the status and role of women; and integration of women in the development effort. The second committee's conclusions were either embodied in the world plan, or set out in separate resolutions.

On the conclusion of deliberations in the two committees, the Conference adopted the following documents:

1. A World Plan of Action;
2. A declaration called the Declaration of Mexico; and
3. 34 resolutions.

The World Plan of Action was originally drafted by the United Nations Secretariat and later modified by a 23 member Consultative Committee. Nearly 900 amendments to the draft World Plan of Action were proposed by several delegations and in particular by the Group of 77 representing the point of view of the developing countries. The Group of 77 played an active role in putting forward the views of the developing countries and having them incorporated in the final documents and resolutions adopted by the Conference. Though differences were inevitable between the developed and the developing countries on certain issues and were reflected in the course of debate in the two committees on various questions, by and large, the atmosphere was one of co-operation and not confrontation. There was realization of the need of an integrated approach on the part of both developing and developed countries in order to bring about a real forward movement.

The World Plan of Action, which is the principal document adopted at the Conference has an introduction containing basic principles with separate sections on national and international and regional action and on the review and appraisal of action taken on the Plan.

The introduction states that the plan is intended to stimulate national and international action to solve problems of under-development and of the socio-economic structure which place women in a position inferior to that of men. Stress is laid on equality, not only before the law, but even more so in opportunities for education, training, employment and in many other fields so as to enable women to prepare themselves for a further contribution to the development of society. A new clause inserted by the Group of 77 declares that development is also hampered by the last vestiges of colonialism and other evils, and by the present world economic system which is unfair to the developing countries and needs to be replaced by a new world economic order based on the Charter of Economic Rights and Duties of States.

With regard to national action, the plan provides guidelines for action over a 10-year period and special targets for the first five years. Its recommendations are addressed not only to Governments, but also to women's, youth and other organizations, political parties, trade unions, employers and many other groups. Each Government is advised to frame its own plan and to identify its own targets subject to the guidelines of the World Plan. The specific areas of action over a vast field, including international co-operation, political participation, education and training, employment, health and nutrition, population, housing and family responsibilities, all the measures proposed being aimed at ensuring the same rights, opportunities, benefits and other facilities for women as for men and at enabling women to play a constructive role in the development of society and the maintenance of peace and stability in the world. Stress is laid on the sharing of family and domestic responsibilities by men and women so as to free women for public responsibilities. The minimum target for the first five year period includes a marked increase in literacy, vocational and technical training, equal access to educational and other institutions and many other facilities for women. It also includes the setting up of special machinery within the Government for accelerating progress towards these targets and the full integration of women in national life.

As regards international action, the plan recommends the proclamation of 1975-85 as the Decade for Women and Development so as to ensure that national and international action will be sustained throughout the period. It calls for the full involvement of women in policy-making at both national and international level. Equitable representation of women in national delegations to international bodies is recommended and all international organizations have been asked to ensure that their plans and programmes are so adjusted as to promote the integration of women in all their activities.

The plan recommends that regional measures should take the form of technical and informational support to national Governments for the development of their own plans and strategies. It also recommends that Regional Banks and other institutions should give aid to such national projects as have accepted the integration of women in the development effort and the achievement of equality for women among their primary objectives. Finally, special measures have been suggested for the review and appraisal by international organizations, regional commissions and national machinery of progress made in each sector in the implementation of the plan.

The Declaration of Mexico which has the special contribution of the Group of 77, while repeating some of the principles embodied in the plan and accepting its general approach, makes some declarations in regard to matters of special concern to the developing countries. The Declaration reiterates the demand for the establishment of a new world economic order as envisaged in the decisions taken at the sixth and seventh special sessions of the United Nations General Assembly and implementation of the provisions of the Charter of Economic Rights and Duties of States. The Declaration provides the broad setting in which the developing countries would like to see the promotion of women's rights as an integral part.

The 34 resolutions cover many matters which have also been included in the plan. Some relate to equality between men and women; women's participation in efforts to promote world peace; representation of women in United Nations organizations and conferences; health and family planning; education and training; and a variety of similar matters. Other resolutions have some political significance, such as condemnation of atrocities on women in Chile; support to Palestinian and Arab women; aid to the Vietnamese people; condemnation of the racial policies of the South African and Rhodesian Governments; and demand for the termination of "the colonial situation" in the Panama Canal zone. A final resolution moved by Princess Ashraf of Iran, which was also adopted, requested the General Assembly to convene another world conference after five years to review the implementation of the plan.

#### IV

As I attended the International Women's Conference as a representative of the Human Rights Commission, I would like to add, to what I have reported to the Commission about the Conference, a few observations by way of conclusion.

Mrs. Sipila has described the Conference as a turning point in human history. It was undoubtedly a turning point in the sense that while earlier efforts in the United Nations have been generally confined to requesting Member States to prevent discrimination and to ensure that equal rights are enjoyed by men and women, the Conference drew up a practical action plan for equipping women for the exercise of equal rights. Many Member States have framed their own plans, but others seem to have lagged behind due to lack of facilities and other obstacles. A world plan which does not seek to impose complete uniformity and is flexible enough to be adapted to conditions prevailing in each country could be of great help in mobilizing support for practical measures for the advancement of women throughout the world.

The Conference was also a turning point for another reason. This was the first inter-governmental Conference devoted exclusively to women's questions in which women leaders from all parts of the world played a leading role. They represented rich as well as poor nations and every type of culture, creed, ideology and social and economic systems. Their meeting together in the Conference gave each an opportunity to understand the problems and concerns of all others. In course of time, when the next Conference is held, after five years, this new relationship may lead to closer co-operation among women and help to strengthen international co-operation in other spheres, also.

It must be recognized, however, that on all questions full understanding was not immediately achieved. Nor was such a result to be expected in the very first Conference. There were differences in the approach on the one hand of the developing countries and on the other of developed countries. Some delegations put greater emphasis on social questions such as providing better opportunities for education, training and employment for women and their involvement in the development effort. Other delegations attached greater importance to women exercising political power and being included in all government and other decision-making bodies and international conferences concerned with the maintenance of peace, disarmament and other similar questions. Notwithstanding differences of approach, the atmosphere on the whole was one of co-operation in order to tackle in a united and co-ordinated manner the urgent task of ameliorating conditions of women all over the world and furthering their legitimate rights and aspirations.

The developing countries had accepted the lead given by President Echeverria in his address to the Conference on the first day. They strongly supported the view that social and economic progress is being hampered, both for men and women, by the present international economic order and by the vestiges of colonialism, neo-colonialism, racism, apartheid, zionism and such other evils. This view was eventually adopted by the Conference and embodied in the plan, as well as in the Declaration of Mexico, in spite of the reservations of some countries who felt that the Conference was not the proper forum for raising such issues.

The Conference reflected the same differences of opinion on political and economic questions between the developed and developing countries as are in evidence in all United Nations forums. Subject to these reservations, the plan was accepted in its entirety. This was an important achievement, but there was no sense of complacency about the future. As Mrs. Sipila said, the real work was only now beginning as acceptance of the plan was not enough: it had also to be implemented within the agreed time limit. Many of the delegations sensed the danger of the plan meeting the same fate as earlier plans for the promotion of equal rights had met in many countries. Would it be able to overcome the age-old obstacles to a radical change in the status of women more satisfactorily than other United Nations instruments?

To this question an answer has been provided by the plan itself. It is addressed not only to Governments, but to various unofficial organizations which help or could help, to mould public opinion on such questions. It was the general feeling of all the delegations that a special responsibility rests on unofficial organizations of women. Complete dependence on action from above could not lead to satisfactory results. It would have to be supplemented by an organized effort on the part of women themselves under their own leadership, at all levels.